

2/15/2017

Dear Sen. Catherine Osten, Sen. Paul Formica and Rep. Toni Walker,

I am reaching out to urge you to make sure we fight for full funding in a separate line item for the state After School Grants in the Department of Education budget.

A little back story about my experience with After School Programs 20 years ago. I remember like it was yesterday. I was 11 years old, sitting in the Salvation Army after school van. Mina the head teacher was driving me home from program. This was not something she had to do, but she did it so I could attend the program. For this I will forever be thankful. Mina was 4 foot 11 inches tall, Hispanic, smart, beautiful and she sang, and she sang loud. Not the best voice but she was proud. I looked up to her in a way I hadn't looked up to anyone before. She helped me with homework, we played board games, we talked; she was my mentor. She did what she could -- and then some -- for a small, 6-student program in a small Salvation Army space. I didn't know this until a few years later but Mina was able to help my mother find resources for Christmas gifts and food for us. She was more than just the person who helped me with my homework or play board games. She was strong, helpful and she wanted me to help change the world. She made me feel all the things that prior to this program I didn't feel. She made me feel safe, supported and valued every day.

Fast forward 20 years. I am a first generation college graduate, and I am now the Student Affairs Manager at a New Haven Charter School. I manage all student choice, leadership and after school programs. I have no doubt my relationship with Mina guided me to be in the position I am today. Guiding and encouraging our students, supporting our students, making them feel safe and valued. Common Ground would not be Common Ground without the after school programs that we are able to provide. After school programs are no longer just board games and homework help. Classes that are not typically offered during the school day happen in our after school program. Students who don't get Art or Music in their school day schedule get to pursue their love after school. For some of our struggling learners, after school is where these students feel success and these are successes they are proud of. They are able to ask questions, understand what's happening at their own pace, and not be afraid they are wrong or worry about testing. They are gaining the knowledge they crave to learn not what they have to learn. Our high school basketball team plays in the small school New Haven league. For some of these students, playing basketball is the driving force that makes them come to school everyday. More than 90 students take advantage of our after school programs daily. All 195 of our students rely on after school time not only for enrichment but for additional academic supports and use of computers and internet. Without full funding some of these programs won't be able to happen. How do I as a manager pick which programs go or stay? Knowing every single student at Common Ground would suffer without access to these programs day in and day out. We all know out of school time hours 3-6pm are the most crucial time for students to have access to enriching programs. With the fears that now surround our country it is more important than ever to make sure our young leaders, our students, remain having access to make sure they continue to feel safe, feel valued and feel supported. Please continue to FULLY support our students.